

# FAMOUS KOREANS Six Portraits

By Mary Connor



The purpose of the lesson is to provide an opportunity for students to learn about famous Koreans through readings and/or dramatizations. It is primarily designed to introduce students to famous people who have helped shape Korean history. In the process of studying the six portraits, students will not only learn about influential Koreans, but they will also become familiar with some of the distinctive elements of Korean culture. It is hoped that the lesson will stimulate interest, provoke questions and encourage further study.

In the process of classroom readings and/or dramatic performances, students will learn about tumultuous events that impacted the life of Koreans in the twentieth century, and they will become aware of conflicting views north and south of the 38th parallel. Finally, there will be opportunities to draw conclusions about leadership styles.

## FAMOUS KOREANS: SIX PORTRAITS

Grades: Secondary and Introductory University  
Subject: Asian Studies, Cultural Studies, World History  
Time Required: 2–3 class periods

### OBJECTIVES

1. Develop an appreciation of people who have helped shape the history and culture of Korea
2. Become aware of some of the most important events in Korean history
3. Examine various leadership styles and determine those the students might want to emulate
4. Provide an opportunity to dramatize history by impersonating important figures

### MATERIALS REQUIRED

While this lesson is complete in itself, it can be enriched by books on Korea and updated regularly by checking the Internet for current information.

### PROCEDURE

1. Introduce the lesson and make a brief introductory statement about each of the famous Koreans.
2. Ask students to volunteer in dramatizing one of the six portraits. They are encouraged to practice the reading and, if possible, dress the part. Ideally, there will be dramatizations of all of the characters. If not, ask or assign students to read the individual portraits.
3. Divide the class into groups before the dramatizations/readings begin. Each group is assigned a task. Group #1 reports about the times in which the person lived. Group #2 explains what they learned about the culture and the values of the time. Group #3 explains what they learned about leadership and/or the person's contribution to his/her country.

All students who have completed readings or dramatizations should then be asked to state their conclusions about the varied experiences of the Korean people in the different periods they have studied.

### NOTE TO TEACHER

This lesson can be implemented in various ways depending on class size, student interest and available time. This lesson can begin a unit on Korean history, or individual portraits can be interspersed chronologically in the study of world history. Additional time may be spent on the readings and discussion about Kim Il-Sung and Kim Dae-Jung.

Portrait #1  
**QUEEN SONDOK**

(Reigned 632–47 c.e.)



The above scene depicts the legend of Queen Sondok's pre-science, as recorded in the *Reminiscences of the Three Kingdoms*.  
 Source: *The Life in Korea* Web site:  
<http://www.lifeinkorea.com/culture/clothes/cclothes.cfm?xURL=shilla>

I am the ruler of Silla, one of the three kingdoms on the peninsula. I am the first woman to become a queen in Korea. My father, King Chinp'yong, reigned for fifty years, but had no sons to inherit the throne. Since I am his eldest daughter, I became queen when he died. I also hold my position of authority because of a system that has existed for centuries. It is called the hereditary bone rank system, in other words, bloodline. I am a member of the Kim clan. If you have the name of Kim, I may be one of your ancestors.

For over one thousand years only two other queens achieved my authority and influence. Your United States of America, the world's leading democracy, has only lately espoused women's rights. Think about it: almost fifteen hundred years ago in Korea a woman ruled her people well and held their confidence.

Why am I one of the few women to have authority in Korean history? During my reign Confucianism still had minimal influence. Even though Confucius lived 500 years before the birth of Christ, his philosophy has greater influence on people of Asian descent in the United States now than it had in my time; however, the Confucian ideal of an ethical-moral system was working its way into my

kingdom. In Silla we had no prejudice against women rulers. My people believed in Buddhism, Daoism and Shamanism.

I am very kind, respectful, wise and far-sighted. I am known for my powers to predict the future. The people of Silla are fortunate to have me for their leader. The Korean peninsula is a very violent place. We struggle with two other rival kingdoms: Koguryo and Paekche. Paekche, under King Mu, is intent upon destroying Silla. The kingdom of Koguryo is so strong that it even defeats the forces of the emperor of T'ang China. When Koguryo and Paekche ally against Silla, I seek help from the T'ang dynasty. Thus, I initiate a pro-T'ang policy that would help pave the way for the unification of the peninsula under Silla.

In spite of the fact that I have to worry about the defense and security of my kingdom and even a plot to usurp my throne, I dedicate myself to improving the life of my people. Since I value the importance of education, I send students to China to receive the best education possible. Even though my reign is relatively short, there is much cultural and religious advancement.



The pagoda at Punhwangsa. The only surviving stone pagoda of pre-unified Silla.  
 Photo courtesy of Mary Connor.

Under my direction the Buddhist temple of Punhwangsa, the nine-tiered pagoda of Hwangnyongsa, and one of the oldest astronomical observatories in the world, Ch'omsongdae, are completed. In your time this observatory is still considered one of the most important structures in Korea. I also order the construction of the famous nine-tiered pagoda of Hwangnyongsa to protect us from foreign invasions. While it does protect us, it will be destroyed during the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century; however, enough of the foundation remains, so you can still get an idea of its former glory. If you travel to Korea, come to Kyongju, the ancient capital of the Silla, and you can see the mounds covering the tombs where our leaders are buried. You will be impressed by the splendid gold crowns, necklaces, pendants and earrings that have been discovered in our burial mounds. These are just a few of the jewels of my queendom. They exemplify a golden age in Korean history.



Typical burial mount of the Silla leaders.  
 Photo courtesy of Mary Connor.

I was born on May 15, 1397, the grandson of T'aejo, the founder of the Choson dynasty, a dynasty that lasts even longer than the Koryo dynasty. I am born near the Kyongbok Palace, a palace that you can visit in Seoul today. My oldest brother is supposed to become king, but is passed over in my favor. I am highly motivated, interested in learning, and widely read. It may sound strange to you, but I am married at age twelve to a girl two years older than I. This is the custom in my day and prevailed through the early years of the twentieth century.

When I am twenty-two the king, who is very impressed with me, decides that I should become the crown prince. In 1419, I assume the throne, and my reign is considered the high point of the Choson dynasty. Indeed, the whole of the fifteenth century is marked by noticeable cultural and political achievements.

I am praised for my commitment to my country. I care deeply about my people, devote my life to establishing good government, and develop ways to improve the quality of life for everyone. I am admired for my mastery of the Confucian classics, but I am in my later years a devout Buddhist, especially after the death of my wife. I am fascinated by the world of science, especially astronomy. During my reign we chart constellations, refine rain gauges, various sundials and water clocks. Since our economy is based on agriculture, it is important that we find ways to improve agricultural production.

Handbooks to improve agricultural production and medical books are completed in my time. To protect our homeland from invaders, our technicians develop new forms of cannon and artillery.

I believe my responsibility is to seek out talented people and to train them in the art of good government according to the Confucian classics. Once they are trained, it is important to give them tasks that will fully utilize their talents. I establish an excellent library and select very able scholars to devote all of their time to improve the quality of education. I also seek out talented people in the countryside and make sure that these people get appropriate recognition from their provincial governor. These people also work in government or in posts that are appropriate for their abilities.

My main goal is to find ways for my people to become more literate. We use the Chinese system of writing, which involves memorizing thousands of characters that are very complicated and difficult to learn. I decide to develop a simple and effective system of writing. What is created is *han'gul*, a phonetic writing system that is very scientific and easy to learn. Koreans now have their own system of writing. This is my greatest accomplishment.

I have many other interests. I desire to have a book written to help the common people become more successful farmers. This leads to a farmer's handbook that improves farming techniques and increases production. I am also very concerned about the health of my people. Under my direction a medical dictionary and an encyclopedia are written. The encyclopedia, in eighty-five volumes, consists of medical treatments to cure nearly one thousand diseases. Some of the treatments include herbal prescriptions and acupuncture. I also promote art, music, astronomy, science and practical inventions. I am credited with developing a rain gauge two hundred years before a similar instrument is developed in Europe. I also advance the use of movable type. You might not know that Koreans invented movable type nearly two hundred years before Gutenberg.

I also have some impressive political achievements. I am able to defeat the Japanese pirates who are menacing our coasts and also extend the territory of Choson up to the Yalu River, the border of North Korea today. I also try to raise the moral standards of my country.

In my later years I become paralyzed. I have great difficulty speaking. If this is not bad enough, I develop cancer and die at the age of fifty-two. A street named after me is near Kyongbok Palace, near to where I was born nearly six hundred years ago. People continue to be amazed by the social, political, academic and scientific achievements of my reign. It is a golden age for Korea.

## Portrait #2 KING SEJONG

(1397-1450)



Image source: Korean Heritage. Published by Hollym International Corp.

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Image source: The Korea Insights Web site:  
<http://korea.insights.co.kr/english/fmp/fmp.02.html>

Portrait #3  
**ADMIRAL YI SUN-SHIN**

(1545–98)



Image source: *The People's Korea* Web site:  
[http://www.korea-np.co.jp/pk/100th\\_issue/99062307.htm](http://www.korea-np.co.jp/pk/100th_issue/99062307.htm)

I am Admiral Yi Sun-Shin, one of the most famous military heroes in Korean history. I am well known as the inventor of a Turtle Ship, an ironclad warship that looks like a turtle. I use this ship to defeat the Japanese at a time when their ships and armies are causing death and destruction throughout our country. I am a brilliant military strategist, a great patriot and a defender of Korea.

I am born into an impoverished *yangban* (aristocrat) family, but through hard work and determination I become a very respected man. At twenty-one I begin to learn about military arts through self-study and work hard as an apprentice to manufacturers of weapons. When I am twenty-eight, I take the government examinations to become a military officer. During the practical part of the exams, I fall off my horse and fail the exam. I am devastated. I disappoint my family and know that I now will have to wait four long years before the next exam. Finally, at age thirty-two, I pass the exam. I am commissioned as a junior officer and go on assignment in a far-away place along the Tumen River on the northern border of Korea. I hold various posts in different locations, but then I am promoted to commander of a naval station in Cholla province. It is in this capacity that I achieve fame by defeating the Japanese in their invasion in 1592 under the direction of their great conqueror, Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

Before Hideyoshi's anticipated invasion, I build my famous Turtle Ship. I create the world's first ironclad long before your Monitor of Civil War fame. My first ship is nearly sixty-five feet long, fifteen feet wide amidships, with sides nearly eight feet high. On the sides are portholes through which cannons are fired to blow the Japanese out of the water. Thick iron plates with iron spikes on the deck will prevent the enemy from boarding. There is a fearsome dragon's head on the bow of the ship. By burning a combination of sulfur and saltpeter, clouds of smoke are emitted through the dragon's head and create a protective smoke screen.

In 1592, when my Turtle Ships engage the Japanese, we manage to cut off their source of supplies. We easily destroy twenty-six of their thirty ships. On land, guerrilla armies are formed; aristocrats, peasant farmers, Buddhist monks, women and slaves fight together with Ming troops and force the Japanese to retreat. Five years later Hideyoshi tries again and launches a second invasion. This time we are even better prepared. I only have twelve ships, but I lure the Japanese into a narrow strait. We wait patiently for them to enter the channel and when they do, we destroy their ships, a fleet of over 300 strong! As the enemy retreats, a stray bullet hits me, and I die. The great Hideyoshi also dies soon after. The war is now over. Korea has been saved. Japan's forces retreat to their home islands and will now pursue a policy of isolation for over 250 years. Only in 1853 with the force of one quarter of the United States navy will Japan open her ports to the world.

Though my victory is many years old, it pleases me that I remain one of Korea's great heroes. When you visit Seoul, you will see a statute of my ship and me in downtown Seoul. And if you visit the Korean War Memorial Museum, you will find a magnificent replica of my famed Turtle.



Illustration depicting Admiral Yi Sun-Shin and the 'Kobukson' or turtle ship in 1592.

Image source: *The Window on Korea* Web site:  
<http://cinema.sangji.ac.kr/WINDOW/window/win00048.htm>

I am one of Korea's most famous independence fighters. I am very young, just sixteen years old, but people believe that I contribute significantly to the Independence Movement against Japan. I am enraged by what has happened to our country during the occupation and organize and provoke people to resist Japanese colonialism. I help plan the March 1, 1919 demonstration, a nonviolent peaceful protest similar to your Martin Luther King's civil rights march on Washington in 1963. While most people followed King's march on Washington, we plan our protest secretly. We catch the Japanese completely by surprise, a tribute to our careful organization as well as to the overly confident police. The peaceful demonstration sparks a nationwide movement in the following months and involves over one million people. Massive demonstrations on this scale are unprecedented, and it is clear that the Japanese do not think we are capable of such a concentrated effort.

We suffer greatly under Japanese rule. The idealism of Woodrow Wilson and his Fourteen Points raises our hopes at the end of WWI. We believe, perhaps naively, that Wilson's proclamation of self-determination for subjugated peoples will somehow lead to Korean independence. Our hopes are very high.

The leaders of the movement write a Declaration of Independence, expressing our desire to be free and independent. Thirty-three Korean nationalists sign this document.

Three years before the demonstrations begin, I start attending the Ewha Girls' School in Seoul, one of Korea's earliest schools for women. I study very hard and become known as someone with firm convictions and commitment. When I return home during the summers to my small village, I teach people to read and expose them to Western science and geography, which is very different from the traditional Chinese classical education they are receiving.

In 1919 the determination to be independent from Japan reaches a climax when King Kojong, who abdicates his throne in 1907, dies in Seoul amid rumors he has been poisoned by the Japanese. My classmates and I join the nation in our sorrow for the king. Leaders of the Independence Movement decide to capitalize on the mood of the country and agree to massive demonstrations on March 1, two days before the king's funeral.

When my friends and I get copies of the Declaration of Independence, we pledge that we will participate in a mass demonstration in Pagoda Park in downtown Seoul. Our principal strongly advises the students not to participate. However, on March 1, seven of us cut class and join the crowd at Pagoda Park. A few days later I join the protests, but this time I am arrested, though only for a short time.

When the governor-general closes all the schools in Seoul because of the unrest, I return to my hometown where I convince my brother and several friends to hold a rally similar to the one in Pagoda Park. With the help of members of a local church, I begin to organize a demonstration. I travel from village to village to get additional support. I announce that the signal for the demonstration to begin will be a lighted torch on the mountaintop. I personally light the torch and carry it to the mountaintop.

The next day I address a crowd assembled in the market place. We wave the national flag, which is outlawed by the Japanese government. We shout for independence. The police appear and shoot down many people. My parents are among the first to be killed. They arrest many people, including me.

I am tortured for many days. Then I am transferred to a prison in Kongju. I am later tried, found guilty, and sentenced to three years in prison in Seoul. Prison life is very difficult for me. After a period of torture and suffering, I die. My last words are "Japan shall fall." I die along with an estimated 7,500 others in demonstrations that sweep the country in a period of ten months. There are approximately 45,000 arrests.

The movement fails terribly. Our country will not be independent until the Japanese are defeated in 1945. The twentieth century is a time of terrible sorrow for my people: occupation, war and political division. Yet we never give up hope to be a unified nation.

I am glad that I am remembered for my role in our history. I am often called the Korean Joan of Arc. I give hope to my people when they need it the most. There is a shrine in my memory in Ch'onan, the village of my birth. I am buried on the mountain where I carried the torch for freedom many years before. In Seoul there is a statue in my famous pose, arm outstretched, torch in hand.

Portrait #4  
**YU KWAN-SUN**  
(1904–20)



Image source: The Web site page *Ryu Kwan Sun's Dungeon 800 Words*:  
<http://www.crosswinds.net/~sronej/dungeon.html>

Portrait #5  
**KIM IL-SUNG**  
(1912–94)



Image source: *The People's Korea* Web site:  
[http://www.korea-np.co.jp/pk/100th\\_issue/99062307.htm](http://www.korea-np.co.jp/pk/100th_issue/99062307.htm)

I was born on a very memorable and tragic day in history, the day the Titanic sinks (April 15, 1912). My name is originally Kim Sung Chu. My life spans eighty-two years of the twentieth century. I was born into a peasant family and rise to be the supreme leader of the North Korean people for forty-nine years, longer than any Korean political leader of the century. When the people speak about me, they call me Great Leader. I continue to be admired as the peerless patriot, national hero, ever-victorious guerrilla fighter, wise teacher, outstanding leader of the international Communism movement, shrewd strategist and the best-known Korean politician of the twentieth century. During my lifetime I take up arms to liberate my country from Japanese militarists who rule our country for thirty-five years, vehemently oppose the division of Korea after World War II, create an equitable and just society by establishing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and fight for the reunification of my country during the Korean War.

Because the Japanese occupy our country, many Korean families leave their homeland to live a life free from domination. I am still a child when my parents leave Japanese-occupied Korea for Manchuria; however, in time, the Japanese control Manchuria as well. When I am only twenty, I become the leader of a small group of Koreans who lead raids against Japanese outposts in North Korea. In a few years I am a significant guerrilla leader; in fact, the Japanese consider me to be one of the most

effective and dangerous of guerrillas. While fighting the occupation forces, I adopt the name Kim Il-Sung after a famous Korean guerrilla leader of the early twentieth century. The Japanese are so upset with me that they form a special counter-insurgency unit to track me down, but they never catch me.

I work with Chinese Communists and other guerrilla fighters, but we are under no one's orders except our own. When Japanese pursue us, we cross the border into the Soviet Union; however, the Soviets provide few weapons or material aid. We work in small units, receive the support of local Koreans and annihilate many Japanese. I foster an anti-Japanese spirit in the darkest days of the independence movement. With other revolutionary nationalists, I preach the need for Communism. We are filled with contempt for the failure of our fathers to institute land reform and to modernize Korea. We are determined to forge a strong country that can resist foreign domination. When the Japanese forces crush the guerrillas in Manchuria, I flee to the Soviet Union. By then most of my comrades have been killed. The local Soviet authorities train me.

When the United States drops the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, the Soviet Union declares war on Japan. The Russians say that they liberated Korea. This is false. The liberation of Korea is the culmination of my long and arduous revolutionary struggle. Together with my supporters, we defeat the Japanese and liberate our home.

Immediately after the war the United States decides to divide Korea. This is a tragic mistake. When our country is divided at the 38th parallel, the Soviet Union agrees to occupy the North. Since I have fought with the Chinese in Manchuria and have military training in the Soviet Union, I am well known. The Soviets put me in charge of the formation of the provisional government in Soviet-occupied Korea. During the three-year occupation, I faithfully carry out their directives, but put myself in a leadership position and deal successfully with all opposition. I create a new party (the Workers' Party of Korea), a new army and a new government, all patterned after the Soviet system. No one who collaborated with the Japanese serves in the new government.

What is particularly attractive to me about Communism? The history of the world and the history of China and Korea in particular are tales of the exploitation of the masses of the peasants by rich landlords. In Korea, for thousands of years a minority of landlords exploited the peasants, and during Japanese colonialism conditions became worse. What is not tolerable is the fact that many Korean landlords and business people collaborated with the Japanese during occupation.

What we needed is a revolution similar to the one that occurred under Stalin in the Soviet Union and what Mao Zedong will be able to do when he emerges victorious in 1949 after defeating Chiang Kai-shek. Under the Soviet and Chinese revolutions land is redistributed equitably among the people. I also know that the Soviet Union has rapidly progressed under its Five Year Plans. In a short period of time the country has gone from being a backward agricultural nation to being an industrialized world power. I know that under Communism Korea can modernize rapidly, and that the standard of living will improve for everyone. I also am very aware of the imperialist exploitation of the capitalist nations of the world. Korea will have its revolution, and our nation will become self-reliant and independent.

When the United Nations General Assembly adopts a resolution to conduct national elections to end the Allied occupation and to reunify the country, the Soviet Union refuses to participate in the elections. Most Koreans wish for an end to foreign occupation, but the Soviet Union knows that the United States dominates the United Nations and will not agree with this decision. Consequently, the North Koreans have their own elections, create a constitution for a separate state called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and elect me, Kim Il-Sung, as premier. I proclaim the entire Korean peninsula as our territory and establish P'yongyang as our temporary capital.

When the United States and Soviet Union pull their troops out of South and North Korea, I find an opportunity to reunify Korea by military means. This is to be a civil war between the Korean people with the goal of reunification. I build up a large military of 200,000 men. I believe that the people of Korea will support me. In 1950, I get Stalin's permission for an invasion of the South, which I launch on June 25. In only four days we capture Seoul and overrun most of the country within a short period of time. We nearly win the war. Since the U.S. dominates the U.N., the Security Council votes for a war that should only be for the Korean people to decide.

With the combined forces of the U.N. and MacArthur's successful landing in Inchon, our troops are forced to retreat north of the 38th parallel. When the President of the United States, Harry Truman, decides to extend the fighting beyond the 38th parallel and to advance to the Yalu River to reunify Korea under the direction of Syngman Rhee, I obtain the support of the leaders of the Soviet Union and China. When 150,000 Chinese volunteers come to our aid, we almost win the war for a second time. We could have won the war if the Soviet Union kept its promise to maintain air support for the Chinese troops. We also could have won the war had I directed it. However, once the Chinese army comes into the war, the Chinese push me aside and manage the war. It is important for you to know that North Korea proposed the armistice.

During the Korean War our people suffer too much. The United States devastates us by three years of bombing. No modern buildings are standing. It is a virtual holocaust. Over one and a half million of our people are dead. The armistice still has not become a peace treaty because the Korean people have never been allowed to resolve their own problems. The United States still keeps 37,000 of its troops in South Korea.

After the Korean War, I devote much time to the reconstruction of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). I encourage my people to be dedicated and self-reliant. Under my leadership, we successfully mechanize agriculture, become highly industrialized, militarily very powerful, and independent of the Soviet Union and China. I am able to resolve the century-old boundary dispute between China and North Korea.

I tell my people that there is nothing to envy in the outside world. They will find peace and happiness within their own country. I often say, "to lead an equitable, happy life in a free and peaceful world, without domination, subjugation, aggression and war, is mankind's ideal." This is my goal. In the DPRK I establish a classless society where everyone is equal. Education is universal and free for all of our children. Adult schools and colleges educate factory and farm workers. My people are happy, more prosperous than ever before.

In my final years natural disasters devastate our crops. This makes it more difficult to feed my people, but when the imperialists, such as the United States, place sanctions on my country, children begin to starve. I also begin to groom my son, Kim Jong-Il, to be my successor. It is my final wish to end the conflict with South Korea and to have a summit to resolve our differences.

I die of a heart attack on July 8, 1994. When the news breaks, millions of people stream into and through the capital city, tearing their hair, beating the ground and weeping uncontrollably. Time passes, but my people never forget me. Memorials abound throughout North Korea. There are poems, essays and stories about me. The best institution of higher learning is named after me. What makes me very proud is the sixty-foot-high gold-painted statue of me in Kaesong; this is the largest statue ever built by Koreans for any leader.

My own son, Kim Jong-Il, keeps my memory alive as he leads our great nation. Believe in my son Comrade Kim Jong-Il and everything will be alright. The future of Korea and the twenty-first century rests in his wisdom and courageous leadership. History will prove this without fail. He will lead the efforts to reunify Korea!



Statue of Kim Il-Sung.

Image source: <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/1461/kimilsungbio.htm>

### TEACHER'S NOTES

- Kim Il-Sung did not liberate North Korea in 1945; the Soviet Union did.
- The Allies, including the U.S., decide to divide Korea. The U.S. did dominate the U.N. in 1950, but the boycott of a session of the Security Council by the Soviet Union led to a vote and the subsequent U.N. action in the Korean War.
- The equitable redistribution of land soon gave way to a system of collectives and communes. The economic sanctions placed on North Korea were not the only cause of the DPRK's problems. The economic problems were caused by systemic problems aggravated by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emphasis by the leadership on military outlays (25 percent of the budget), several years of poor harvests, extensive floods, drought, and a cumbersome distribution system.

Portrait #6  
**KIM DAE-JUNG**  
(1924–)



President Kim Dae Jung in Berlin addressing a news conference in Berlin on March 10, 2000.

Photograph by Arnd Wiegmann  
© Reuters NewMedia Inc./CORBIS

In 1997, I am elected president of South Korea during the most severe economic crisis to grip Korea, and other parts of East and Southeast Asia, in decades. This is our worst crisis since the Korean War. I am working to restore economic stability to Korea while simultaneously promoting greater democracy, positive relations with the major powers and a policy of engagement with North Korea. So far I am weathering these challenges much better than people predicted. What has helped me is my Catholic faith, my love for my country, and my dream of reconciliation between the two Koreas. North and South Koreans are one people. We share the same fate.

My past experiences have shaped my beliefs and are helping me in the enormous challenges as president of the Republic of Korea. I have been an active politician, businessman, opposition leader, a political prisoner and the survivor of several assassination attempts. I am a survivor of a death sentence. I tried three times to win the presidency but failed. When I am finally elected president in 1997, it is a very significant event for my wife, three sons and me, but it is also a very significant event in Korean political history. It is the first time a candidate from the opposition party ever wins the presidency.

I would like to tell you a bit about my life. I am the son of a farmer from Haido, an island off the southwestern coast of Korea. Later my family moves to the coastal city of Mokp'o. I am the second of seven children. I am an excellent student and graduate at the top of

my high school class. I receive my master's degree in economics at Kyunghee University in Seoul. Between high school and college, I work for a freight shipping company. I do so well that I become the head of my own company and own nine small freighters. When the Korean War starts, I am in Seoul. I spend the next fifteen days walking home to be with my family. It is very dangerous at this time not only because of the war itself, but because North Korean soldiers and South Korean guerrilla fighters are everywhere. It is not easy to know who is a friend or an enemy. When I get home, I am arrested, but I am one of the fortunate few who manages to escape.

After the war, I make a few unsuccessful attempts for election to the National Assembly. I finally win a seat in 1961, but Park Chung-Hee stages a coup, takes over the government and dissolves the Assembly. I am one of many arrested and imprisoned at that time. In 1963 I am released. I run again, win, and am reelected. I run for the presidency in 1971 and lose in a very close election. Even though there are major suspicions of fraud in the election, I continue to oppose the authoritarian policies of the Park regime. About this time I am in an automobile accident that leaves me with injuries that still cause me difficulties. It is later reported that this accident was instigated by the government.

Following this accident I am kept under constant surveillance by the government. For my own safety, I limit my political activities. I survive another attempt on my life when Korean intelligence agents kidnap me from my hotel room in Tokyo in 1973. I am sentenced to death by the Chun Doo Hwan government in 1980. My hanging is narrowly averted by the intervention of the U.S. government. I am released from prison in 1982 on the condition that I leave Korea. I come to the United States, receive medical treatment and accept a fellowship to study at Harvard. I return to Korea in 1985 even though the Chun government confines me to my home. I run for president in 1987 and lose. I run again in 1992, coming in second.



The 15th Presidential inaugural ceremony.

Image source: The Cheong Wa Dee, Office of the President Web site:  
<http://www.cwd.go.kr/english/president/photo/>



**T**oday I face four challenges as president: economic recovery, democratic consolidation, relations with the major powers in northeast Asia and North-South relations. Most observers think my government has been moving in the right direction.

Democracy in Korea has come a long way since the mass demonstrations in the 1980s that helped bring down the military government. I am a major advocate of greater and more substantial democracy in Korean political life. We need to fight regionalism and “personalism,” or coalescing around individuals rather than policy issues. I am freeing political prisoners and working to improve human rights in Korea.

By the end of my first year of office I have had summit meetings with the heads of the United States, Japan and China. My relationship with the United States is very positive; however, tension grows over reports of a U.S. massacre of civilians at No Gun Ri during the Korean War and the continued presence of 37,000 foreign troops on our soil.

There are a number of very difficult problems in our relationship with Japan as a result of its colonial and wartime doings in Korea. In my inaugural address I state my desire to improve relations with Tokyo, being keenly aware that the development of close ties with Japan is vital to our security and prosperity. In 1998 Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo and I issue a joint declaration that is the first written apology from Japan for its harsh colonial rule. Japan and South Korea will co-host the 2002 World Cup, another indicator of reduced tensions in our perennially difficult relationship. I am improving Korea’s relationship with China and Russia, and they are supporting my North Korea policy.

In my inaugural address, I focus on creating a new dynamic with North Korea to remove the Cold War structure that has held the peninsula in its grip for half a century. As president, I have never wavered from this goal. My most important contribution as president is to improve and promote reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea through my “Sunshine Policy.” This policy is severely tested in 1998 when U.S. satellite photographs reveal what many suspected to be an underground nuclear installation.

It is important to realize that the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on the 38th parallel between the Koreas is the most heavily fortified region in the world. Over one and a half million soldiers face each other across this border. Our capital, Seoul, with a population of eleven million people, is only twenty-five miles away. It is also important for people to realize that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) is regarded as the most totalitarian government in the world and until very recently has been called a “rogue state.”

U.S. intelligence reports about North Korea are worrisome. These reports predict that there could be an inter-continental ballistic attack as early as 2005. Even though the United States is the most powerful military power on earth, it cannot necessarily protect itself from nuclear attack from a tiny country, such as the DPRK. It is very obvious and it must be made clear to the world that a resolution to the problems on the peninsula is critical for maintaining world peace.

The year 2000 brings renewed hope for peace and reunification. Between June 13–15, 2000 I meet with Kim Jong-Il, the leader of North Korea, the first meeting of the heads of North and South Korea since the peninsula was divided fifty-five years ago. We sign a landmark agreement pledging concrete steps towards reunifying Korea. This agreement does not deal with North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, its development and foreign sales of advanced missiles, or the North’s demand that the U.S. withdraw its 37,000 troops from South Korea, but we do sign some very important agreements. We agree to begin to allow visits of some 1.2 million members of families separated since the Korean War. We also agree to resolve other human rights problems, narrow the gap between the two economies, and speed cultural, athletic, medical and environmental cooperation and exchanges.



President Kim Dae-Jung (R) with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi (L) at Presidential Blue House in Seoul, March 20, 1999. They met to discuss how to deal with North Korea’s nuclear missile capabilities. © AFP



Kim Dae-Jung shakes hands with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il at a second round of landmark talks at Baekhwawon State Guest House on June 14, 2000. Korea Pool-Yonhap © Reuters NewMedia Inc.



South Korean President Kim Dae-jung receives the Nobel Peace Prize from Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Gunnar Berge, during the ceremony in Oslo December 10, 2000.

Photograph by Reinhard Krause. © Reuters NewMedia Inc./CORBIS.

The year 2000 marks another great moment in my life. I am deeply honored and humbled by being chosen to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for my lifelong struggle for democracy and my crusade for reconciliation with North Korea.

Kim Jong-Il and I signal the end of the historic enmity between the Koreans. We will work to satisfy the yearning of the peninsula's sixty-eight million people for reconciliation. The twentieth century was a century of colonization, two world wars, hostility and fear. This century can be a century of reconciliation and peace. My meeting with Kim Jong-Il will hopefully come to symbolize the hopes for this century. ■



Image source: The Official Web site of The Nobel Foundation:  
<http://www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/2000/dae-jung-diploma.html>

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